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Chemical warfare trucks seen in Nicaragua

By Walter Andrews
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U.S. intelligence has recently disclosed the perplexing presence of Soviet chemical warfare equipment in Nicaragua, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger said yesterday.

Mr. Weinberger also said there is a link between the drug traffic from countries such as Colombia and the financing of Marxist insurgents in Central America, but the Pentagon is limited by law in helping counteract it.

"I think there is no doubt the Nicaraguans have received chemical warfare equipment," the defense secretary replied to a question during testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Testifying with the defense secretary, the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, Gen. John W. Vessey Jr., said the equipment observed "in recent months" was decontamination trucks.

He said the Pentagon was not sure the Sandinistas had offensive chemical munitions but noted they are difficult to identify unless the actual shells can be seen.

"We don't have any evidence of offensive equipment. That would certainly be terrible," America's top soldier said.

Talking with reporters after the hearing on foreign military assistance, the general said, "Why do they [the Nicaraguans] want chemical weapons when there's nobody else in the region with an offensive capability?"

He said he didn't know the reason, but added, "Either it's nefarious, or it's a dumb use of the security assistance money that they're [the Sandinistas] getting from the Soviets."

Asked if he expected the Sandinista government to acquire offensive chemical weapons, Gen. Vessey replied, "I really don't know. I would hope not."

On the use of the drug trade to support communist insurgencies in Central America, the general said, "We think the link between drugs and the support of insurgencies is a very important one for us to recognize."

He noted that aid to foreign law enforcement agencies has traditionally not been included in U.S. military assistance overseas.

"Perhaps we need to look at that mixture. The more we could use our security assistance budget to help all our problems, including drug interdiction, is one [question] we need to examine. We are examining the problem," Gen. Vessey said.

But Mr. Weinberger qualified this comment by saying that by law "there's a very strict line we're not able to cross at all between military assistance and doing anything to instruct internal police and law enforcement activities."

The defense secretary said the Pentagon provides indirect support such as intelligence information as much as it can to help foreign police agencies cut off drug smuggling to the United States.

"If we were to talk about a direct role that far away from the United States, we would need very specific and broad legislative authority," Mr. Weinberger told the committee.

Situations would then be run into "such as Colombia" that would probably involve the War Powers Act, which limits the use of American troops overseas without congressional approval, the defense secretary said.

"You have to be aware of all these issues as you broaden out the department's authority," he told the committee.

Mr. Weinberger said present administration policy is to help friendly foreign nations, to the extent possible, cut off the deadly flow of drugs. He acknowledged that "if this doesn't work we may consider the alternative" of reducing or cutting off foreign aid to drug-exporting nations.

Mr. Weinberger also said:

- In sending aid to "contra" insurgents fighting the Sandinistas, the United States is "trying to help them help themselves in the same kind of goal we had 200 years ago."

- He is "disappointed and unhappy" about the deterioration of relations between the United States and Greece.

- Increases in military aid to Israel and Egypt were justified both by the external Soviet threat to the region and the internal threat of terrorism and faltering economies.

- There had not been as yet any formal specific requests from China for military equipment, which would be sent to Congress for approval. However, he said, "it is vital that we help them."